

Webmail Services

Web-based email services allow you to access your inbox from anywhere in the world, and they needn't cost you a penny. David McKinnon tests six of the best services

You probably have an email address at work, and perhaps one provided by your ISP, but it pays to have an independent account in case your circumstances change. A webmail account is the best option and it needn't cost a penny.

Webmail is primarily designed to be accessed through a web browser. Your mail remains on a central server, which you log into through a web interface. This means you can access your email system from any computer that has a browser. All but one of the webmail services reviewed here also lets you connect using an email client such as Microsoft Outlook or Mozilla Thunderbird, either through POP3 or IMAP.

Most of the services have a Java-based interface, which means they look and behave more like conventional offline applications. The new generation of webmail services also provide substantially more storage space, and some even have dedicated spaces to hold uploaded files and photos.

The range of tools on offer has also increased, with contacts databases now supplemented by interactive calendar and organiser tools, note-taking and archiving tools, in-window instant messaging and online documents, as well as tools for sharing files and photos.

We have selected six of the best webmail services to help you choose the one suits you.

AOL AOL Email

★★★★

Free
www.aol.co.uk



AOL's Java-based interface looks clean and efficient. Links to your email folders

▲ AOL Email's interface is uncluttered but slow

and other tools sit on the left of the screen, and your inbox is in the centre. Where most other services reserve the right side of the screen for adverts, AOL uses this space to run AOL Instant Messenger, a to-do list, People and Events. The last two are pared-down versions of the main Contacts and Organizer tools accessible through the left pane. Each service is useful to have close to hand in a dedicated screen position.

Unfortunately, the interface isn't very responsive. There's a lag between what your mouse does and what happens onscreen, and the lack of an HTML version means that those with slower computers or internet connections might want to steer clear.

Like Yahoo! and Hotmail, AOL inserts a small advert for AOL at the bottom of outgoing messages, which can look unprofessional if you use the service for business email. It doesn't offer a premium service, either, so you're stuck with the ad. AOL Mail does support IMAP, however, so you can access your email through a client such as Outlook or Thunderbird.

AOL provides unlimited storage, although there's no dedicated file or photo storage. You also have to remember to transfer messages that you want to keep to a special folder, as any read emails left in your inbox are usually deleted automatically, although this does depend on your settings.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Unlimited storage
- ✓ Good layout
- ✗ Emails deleted automatically

WEBMAIL SERVICE Unlimited storage, 16MB maximum attachment, Java interface, IMAP

GOOGLE Google Mail

★★★★

Free
www.gmail.com



Google Mail looks the least sophisticated email service here.

▲ Google Mail looks basic, but supports POP and IMAP

This makes it faster than the other services on test, though, so it's better-suited for those with older PCs and slow connections.

The main screen is uncluttered. It has only a handful of buttons and most links are simple text labels. This makes it incredibly easy to navigate. Adverts are displayed only when you view individual messages and are based on the content of that mail. This gives rise to some serious privacy concerns.

When you receive a reply to an email, the original sits just below for reference, helping you to keep track of email exchanges. Unlike most email services, Google mail doesn't allow for user-defined folders. Instead, you use a labelling system to categorise your email. An archive process helps you keep your inbox tidy, and you can find archived messages by browsing the archive folder, clicking through your labels or running an email search. The latter is a powerful tool that lets you define precise search terms so you can confidently uncover the relevant email.

Google Mail is the only service on test to support both POP and IMAP. A Google Mail account also provides access to a range of other services, including Google Calendar, Google Documents and the Picassa photo-management tool. There's no dedicated file storage utility, but you can pay for extra space should you need more than the generous 5GB provided.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Excellent search facilities
- ✓ POP and IMAP retrieval
- ✗ Targeted ads raise privacy concerns

WEBMAIL SERVICE 5GB storage, 20MB maximum attachment, HTML interface, POP/IMAP

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INBOX.COM

Inbox.com



Free (5GB); £5 per year with backup; £15 per year for 30GB with backup
www.inbox.com



▲ Splitting the view horizontally makes Inbox tricky on widescreens

Inbox's free email service provides 5GB of storage. This accommodates your inbox, files uploaded to the included storage space and photos you post on the integrated photo-sharing utility. The service is bolstered by an organiser and basic notes application. Inbox successfully integrates these tools into a cohesive interface, with each one housed in a separate tab.

Your mail folders line the left side of the page, while the bulk of the page shows the contents of the selected folder. You can configure Inbox to show a preview of the selected email but, unlike Hotmail and other client applications, this preview appears below the list, rather than to the right, so you have to scroll down to see it. This is annoying if you have a widescreen display, as you lose sight of the important email information.

Inbox uses both email labelling and folders for archiving and cataloging your messages. This allows for flexible email management and makes it easy to find and isolate a particular email either by navigating through folders or searching by labels. As well as a standard spam filter, Inbox employs a system in which any email it receives from an unknown source is sent a reply asking for verification. Until Inbox receives this, the initial email resides in the Unverified folder.

Despite Inbox's generous storage provision and a collection of well-integrated tools, the service's cumbersome split-view layout is a problem.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Responsive interface
- ✓ Well-integrated additional tools
- ✗ Badly positioned preview pane

WEBMAIL SERVICE 5GB storage, 20MB maximum attachment, Java interface, POP

LYCOS

Jubii



Free
www.jubii.co.uk



▲ Jubii's Communication interface handles mail and, soon, phone calls

Jubii looks quite different to the other email services on test. It is

divided into two parts: Communication, which includes email and will be extended to cover telephony, and Media, which is a location for file storage and sharing. It provides a comprehensive contacts database but no calendar or organiser, so Jubii is better suited to home and leisure use than business. This is further confirmed by the lack of POP or IMAP support, which means you can't access your Jubii email using Microsoft Outlook.

The sparse, Java-based interface uses tabs instead of folders to house email, but instead of creating new tabs to catalogue your messages, Jubii uses a tagging system. You can assign multiple tags to each email as you read it and use these to filter your inbox. The same tags are also used to identify your uploaded media files. Adapting to this system takes a while, but eventually it makes finding emails by their content fast and logical. However, it works only if you tag emails as they arrive. If you don't, you can use the highly impressive search tool, which scours your entire Jubii account, including contacts, tags, the body text of messages and media files, and displays live results as you type.

Jubii users have two inboxes: one for messages from trusted sources and another for email from people not in your contacts list. This makes it easier to identify your important communications.

Despite some initial teething troubles, Jubii is a good alternative to Hotmail and Yahoo! Mail.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Innovative interface
- ✓ Excellent search and tagging system
- ✗ Can be confusing

WEBMAIL SERVICE 10GB storage (reduced to 4GB after one million registrations), 10MB maximum attachment, Java interface

MICROSOFT

Windows Live Hotmail



Free (5GB); Hotmail Plus £15 per year (10GB)
www.hotmail.com



▲ The old-timer Hotmail looks great after its Java-based facelift

Hotmail is one of the oldest webmail services but, thanks to a Java-based facelift, it's among the best-looking here. The layout borrows heavily from Microsoft Outlook and shows both your inbox and a viewing pane for the current message. This lets you review the contents of your inbox quickly without explicitly opening and closing messages. Another innovation is that the interface sits within the boundary of the browser window, so as you scroll down a message, the interface stays put.

Rather than selecting individual messages and allocating a destination folder, you can drag and drop single or multiple messages from the inbox directly to a folder. This saves time and effort when filing your mail and is more in keeping with the way you handle files on your desktop, although it takes more housekeeping than Google Mail's file-and-forget concept.

There is no direct support for POP or IMAP, but most common email clients, including Outlook and Thunderbird, have tools or plug-ins that can retrieve mail from the Hotmail server. Hotmail inserts a small advert in the footer of every email you send, although the Plus service removes these and provides additional storage space.

The integrated organiser can be shared for collaborative work, and the associated Microsoft Spaces provides an extra 1GB for your files and photos. If you can live with adverts in your email, Hotmail is a great option.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Much-improved interface
- ✓ Email preview pane
- ✓ Good range of tools

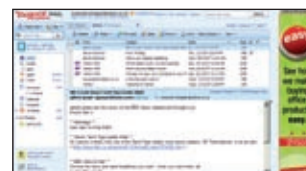
WEBMAIL SERVICE 5GB storage, 10MB maximum attachment, Java/HTML interface

YAHOO!

Yahoo! Mail



Free; Yahoo! Plus £12 per year
www.yahoo.co.uk



▲ Unlimited storage and Outlook syncing make Yahoo! a good bet

Yahoo! Mail provides unlimited storage, so even if you receive lots of messages with large attachments, you needn't worry about an overflowing inbox. As with all the services on test, however, Yahoo! Mail imposes a maximum size for attachments. This is currently 10MB per email, rising to 20MB with the Yahoo! Plus service. As with other services here, Yahoo! inserts a small advert at the bottom of all sent mail unless you pay for the Yahoo! Plus service.

Yahoo!'s interface is similar to Hotmail's. It includes drag-and-drop email management and folders to catalogue your messages. Each element of the interface is fixed relative to the browser window, so you don't lose sight of the important controls when you scroll down a message. There's a decent-sized preview pane below the inbox but, unlike the Inbox preview pane, this doesn't prevent you viewing all your email information easily.

Although there's no dedicated storage space or photo-sharing utility, Yahoo!'s Calendar, contacts and notes tools are well executed and integrate well with the main application. All the services here allow you to import and export contacts lists in .csv format, but Yahoo! lets you sync the address book, calendar and notes tools with Outlook or Palm Desktop. This could prove invaluable if you rely on Outlook to manage your working life, particularly if you are often away from the office.

There's little difference between the Yahoo! and Hotmail services. If you want close integration with Outlook, Yahoo! is the best option, but if you want separate file and photo storage, Hotmail is the better choice. **CS**

SUMMARY

- ✓ Unlimited storage
- ✓ Excellent interface
- ✓ Syncs with Outlook

WEBMAIL SERVICE Unlimited storage, 10MB maximum attachment, Java interface, POP